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FEDERATED LABOR AS A NEW FACTOR IN BRITISH POLITICS.

BY J. KEIR HARDIE, M.P.

THE Independent Labor Party is a Socialist, and not, as its title might seem to imply, a purely working-class organization. It aims at the creation of a Co-operative Commonwealth, founded upon the socialization of land and capital. Its methods of realizing its objects are, to educate the community in the principles of Socialism and to secure the return to Parliament and to all elected bodies of members representative of its principles. Since its formation in 1893, it has been regarded as the stormy petrel of politics, and has kept itself well in evidence mainly by running its own candidates and by missionary zeal and activity. The actual paying membership of the party is returned at 13,000, including a fair proportion of the educated and well-to-do classes who see in Socialism the only hope for solving the social problem. The yearly income of the party averages £25,000. As the bulk of this comes from the wage-earning classes, and as the payments are purely voluntary, this sum argues a considerable degree of sincerity. In addition to the regular membership named above, the party commands the active political support of that very large and rapidly growing section of the community which has lost faith in the Liberal Party as an effective instrument of reform. The energies of its members are tireless, and its political resources are apparently inexhaustible. It is a standing illustration of the truth of John Stuart Mill's axiom, that in politics one man with convictions is equal to ninety-nine who have only interests.

Prior to 1893, there had been no sustained effort to create a Labor Party in Britain. In the early sixties, the old International Working Men's Association promised for a time to become a power, but it went down under the Continental influence by which

it was dominated. During the seven years ending 1874, there was great political activity among trades-unionists, who were at that time endeavoring to secure full legal recognition for their organizations. The effort culminated with the running of seventeen Labor candidates at the General Election in the year named and the defeat of the Liberal Party. The year following saw the passing of the Bills which secured full recognition to the trades-union movement; and, the object aimed at having thus been gained, the leaders of the movement lapsed back into the ranks of their ordinary political allegiance and there the matter ended.

Nothing more was done until 1887, when the Labor Electoral Association came into being. It succeeded in existing, in struggling fashion, for a few short years, and then collapsed, without leaving any indication of its ever having been. At that time, there was considerable ferment in the Labor world, and the Labor Electoral Association, with its half-hearted policy, alienated the support of the active spirits by its feverish anxiety not to offend orthodox political opinion.

Somewhere about 1880, William Morris and H. M. Hyndman commenced their Socialist propaganda; and the Social Democratic Federation, modelled largely on the lines of the German organization of that name, was formed and for a time enlisted in its ranks most of the men who have since become powerful in connection with Labor politics. But it failed to hold them. William Morris withdrew and formed the Socialist League, and John Burns and others of equal standing left owing to disagreement with the tactics which were being pursued.

The great Dock Strike of 1888 may be taken as the starting point of the new Labor movement, as, with the single exception of John Burns, all the men who came to the surface during that convulsive period were subsequently identified with the inception and propaganda work of the Independent Labor Party. At the General Elections of 1892, a number of Labor candidates were run by local organizations in various parts of the country; and, the year following, at a conference held in Bradford in Yorkshire, at which one hundred and twenty representatives of various Labor and Socialist organizations attended, the Independent Labor Party was definitely launched and entered upon its career.

At that time, the Liberal party was in office, with a small and precarious majority. Trade was much depressed, and tens of

thousands of workmen were roaming the country in fruitless search for employment. As is usual at elections, great hopes and expectations had been formed as to what would happen if the Liberals were returned. In the very nature of things, it was impossible that these hopes could be realized; and, as the months slipped into years, enthusiastic Radicals, finding that their party, in office was apparently as unable or as unwilling to do anything effective for Labor as their Conservative opponents had been, deserted in thousands and cast in their lot with the newly formed Independent Labor Party. At every by-election in an industrial centre, the Independent Labor Party ran a candidate, with results which surprised friends and opponents alike. In only one case did the Labor candidate come within measurable distance of winning; but in every case the number of votes polled showed the strength of the feeling of discontent which existed in the constituencies. In those days, the hand of every man was against the Independent Labor Party, which had dared to set itself in opposition to the cherished political traditions of the nation. The press, the pulpit, and the platform fulminated and stormed against the new movement; whilst the usual misrepresentations and silly inventions were freely indulged in and, of course, as freely believed. The party, however, held on its way unswerving. Its members were enthusiasts, but not mere theorists; there was always a method behind their apparent madness. Inspired by a Socialist ideal, they yet managed to keep their feet firm on solid earth; and the politicians learned that the British workman, despite his well-known proclivities, could be a practical kind of idealist when properly led. At the General Election of 1895 the party ran twenty-eight candidates of its own, every one of whom, including the present writer, was defeated. As showing the state of feeling at that time, I may remark, in passing, that the return of my Conservative opponent was announced, at the National Liberal Club, as a Liberal triumph. The Independent Labor Party vote represented just under thirty per cent. of the electoral strength in those constituencies which its candidates had contested. In 1900, we had the Khaki election, when, despite the fact that all its candidates were Pro-Boers and as such anathema to every "patriotic" voter, the party vote showed a largely increased following, and in one case, my own, won a seat from a Liberal who had given an enthusiastic support to the war in South Africa.

Up to this stage, 1900, the idea of seeking to create a Labor Party had, in the main, been confined to the ranks of the Independent Labor Party. Where a trades-union had sought representation in Parliament, the candidate was put forward as a working-man Liberal or Conservative, as the case might be. Recent events, however, chiefly the decisions of the law courts in trades-union cases, have led to a new and startling development. The trades-unions have practically cut themselves adrift from their old political moorings, and they are heading direct for the open sea of Labor Representation and a Labor Party. I have already indicated how the Houses of Parliament gave full recognition and legal standing to the trades-unions. For close upon thirty years, the law was assumed to regard trades-unions as voluntary organizations, in the nature of clubs, which could neither sue nor be sued, and as not being entities known to the law, since they were not an individual, a corporation, or a company. Picketing, it was assumed, had also been fully legalized, including the power to "peacefully persuade" men to abstain from working. The strike in all its phases, it was supposed, had been legalized. The decisions of the law courts in recent cases have upset these suppositions. Employers of labor have been able to sue trades-unions as such and obtain damages from the funds, in one case amounting to £23,000 for the alleged illegal acts of the union officials. Peaceful persuasion whilst picketing has been held to be clearly illegal, rendering the pickets liable to imprisonment; whilst the sympathetic strike has been once again brought within the definition of the common law of conspiracy. These facts have naturally alarmed the trades-unionists and forced them into the political arena. With the very existence of trades-unions imperilled, they instinctively feel that they cannot trust either of the political parties to see justice done them.

For years past, the feeling in favor of a direct Labor Party has been making steady headway within the trades-union movement, but it was held in check by the fact that the ranks were about equally divided in their allegiance to the Liberal and Conservative parties. Many of the leaders of the unions, on the other hand, had been brought into political conflict with the militant spirits of the Independent Labor Party, and, as a consequence, were none too well disposed towards that movement. To the onlooker, the result seemed to be a tangle, escape from which was almost hope-

less. Where the will exists, however, the way will usually be found; and so, when legal necessity compelled the trades-unionists to face the situation, they resolved, at their annual congress in 1889, to call an open conference of representatives of Trades-Unionism, Socialism and Co-operation, to consider what means could be devised for securing more adequate representation of Labor interests in the House of Commons. The conference was held, and what has since been known as the Labor Representation Committee came into existence. Perhaps its objects will best be defined by quoting from its constitution, as amended by the annual meeting this year:

"1. The Labour Representation Committee is a Federation of Trades-Unions, Trades-Councils, the Independent Labour Party, and the Fabian Society. Co-operative Societies are also eligible for membership.

"Object. 2. To secure, by united action, the election to Parliament of candidates promoted, in the first instance, by an Affiliated Society or Societies in the constituency, who undertake to form or join a distinct group in Parliament, with its own whips and its own policy on Labour questions, to abstain strictly from identifying themselves with or promoting the interests of any section of the Liberal or Conservative party, and not to oppose any other candidate recognised by this Committee. All such candidates shall pledge themselves to accept this Constitution, to abide by the decisions of the Group in carrying out the aims of this constitution or to resign, and to appear before their constituencies under the title of Labour candidates only."

The Labor Representation Committee is financed by each affiliated organization paying ten shillings for each thousand members. This is for working expenses. In addition, there is a Payment of Members fund, to which each affiliated organization contributes one penny per member *per annum*, and from which it is expected each member returned to Parliament, under the auspices of the Committee, will be paid £200 a year.

That the time was ripe for this new movement is fully evidenced by the fact, that in England and Wales—Scotland having a separate organization—over 900,000 trades-unionists are now affiliated. The movement, as stated above, is a federation, the basis of which is, that each affiliated organization shall finance its own candidates and become responsible for their maintenance if returned to Parliament, each, however, combining with the others to secure the return of their respective nominees. Thus far, a considerable amount of success has attended the new move-

ment. Since the General Election, it has fought four Parliamentary vacancies, two of its candidates being successful and the other two just missing success. From the outset, it has assumed an attitude of rigid independence towards the orthodox parties, with surprising results. The Conservative working-men and their Liberal fellows are finding in the new movement a platform upon which they can stand whilst working for the realization of an object common to both, the protection of their unions and the promotion of their interests as wage-earners. The financial difficulty, which at one time bulked so large when the question of Labor Representation was being considered, has been solved by a contribution of one shilling per member *per annum* to a Labor Representation Fund. By this means, an annual income of not less than £50,000 has been secured. All the principal trades-unions have selected candidates, and these are being eagerly sought after by industrial constituencies. The National Liberal Federation, at its annual meeting a few weeks ago, fully recognized the strength and importance of this new development in Labor politics, and practically advised Liberal Associations in industrial constituencies to stand aside in favor of Labor nominees when these were put forward. Unless the election be rushed, it is a safe estimate that not less than fifty Labor candidates will enter the lists at the next General Election, under the auspices of the Labor Representation Committee, a fair proportion of whom are certain to be returned. They will not all be Socialists, but they will all be Labor members pledged to the formation of a Labor Party in the House of Commons, and to the raising of the Condition of the People question as a distinct political issue.

Circumstances are favorable to the development of the new movement. Apart from the trades-union demands, already referred to, wider issues of greater importance are being opened up daily. The questions of the hour are no longer political but industrial and economic. The growth of the trusts, the precariousness of employment, the increased cost of living and the growing desire on the part of the working class for a larger share in the prosperity of the nation, are all tending to foment a spirit of unrest. Nor is this to be wondered at. On every hand, there is evidence of a surplusage of wealth, in which the worker has little share. If there has been a slight increase in wages, there has also been an increase in house-rent and in certain articles of food,

which has more than redressed the balance. In the staple industries of the country, broken time has become almost chronic; and, whilst this does not diminish the nominal weekly wage, it plays sad havoc with the actual income. Even for the well-to-do artisan, therefore, there is much in his lot of which he has good reason to complain. It does not help him at all to be told that the wealth of the nation is growing at an unprecedented rate; that last year the income of the rich, as shown by the income tax returns was £40,000,000 in excess of the previous year; or that in five years the revenue brought to the exchequer from a penny rate on incomes of £160 and upwards, has gone up by £600,000, or from £2,000,000 to £2,600,000. This may be evidence of national prosperity; but, as an individual, the wage-earner does not feel any the richer, nor is his lot in life made any the more easy.

When we leave the skilled artisan, however, we begin to sound an unfathomable depth of poverty. Wages of agricultural laborers are returned by the Government as averaging, for the whole of England and Wales, thirteen shillings and eightpence per week. Out of this miserable pittance, house-rent has to be paid and a family maintained. Only in very rare instances is the agricultural laborer permitted to eke out this sum by the cultivation of a little plot of land. The farmers, who have the control of the machinery by which the Allotments Act could be put into operation, are strangely averse to giving their laborers opportunities for improving their condition. There are those who argue in favor of a protective duty on corn, as a means of enabling the farmer to pay his laborer better wages; but these are forgetful of the fact that, in the days of high protection in England, the agricultural wages were little over half what they are now, and that, in common with other workers, the laborer's lot, in so far as it has improved, has done so under the operation of Free Trade. It is not alone the agricultural laborer who is living on the verge of starvation all the year round. Recent investigations, conducted by merchant princes like Mr. Charles Booth in London, and Mr. Seeböhm Rowntree in York, the results of which have been since given to the world with a wealth of detailed evidence which permits of no dubiety as to the conclusions, prove that close upon thirty per cent. of the working class are not in receipt of sufficient income to enable them to obtain, for themselves and their dependents, the standard of comfort which they would receive as paupers

in the Poor House or as criminals in gaol. This fact has startled and alarmed people. The comfortable theory that formerly existed, that, but for drunkenness and want of thrift, the working class would all be contented, prosperous and happy, has been shivered to atoms; and, for the first time in her long career of self-delusion, England has been brought face to face with the fact that, despite her world-wide trade, her unparalleled wealth and prosperity, her growing bounds of empire and her political, mechanical and intellectual progress, there is at the foundation of her society an amount of misery and destitution, due to low wages, which casts a dark shadow over the whole national life, and shows how insecure are the foundations upon which the whole structure of her wealth has been raised. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the leader of the Liberal Party, in a recent speech, declared his belief that twelve millions of our population were always living at or under the poverty line. In plain language, this means that twelve millions of the British people are improperly fed, insufficiently clothed and inadequately housed. The Census returns tell us that 480,277 houses of one room are registered in England, Scotland and Wales, and that these contain a living population of 1,571,504. From one to two rooms is a very short step in the social scale; but, on the same authority from which we have just quoted, we learn that forty-four per cent. of the people of Scotland are accommodated in houses of one or two rooms. Speaking with a good deal of practical experience, I assert that, in three cases out of five, the householder of two rooms will be found to be indulging in one or two lodgers, from which it follows that a worse form of overcrowding occurs than when there is only one apartment. With this condition of things staring them in the face, with no hope perceivable of any improvement, there is little wonder that the more thoughtful leaders of the working class have made up their minds to see how far a Labor Party can be instrumental in securing reform. Many of them, although not all, accept Socialism as being not only inevitable but desirable. They reason that, if commercialism, in the heyday of its prosperity and with the markets of the world at its unchallenged disposal, has produced such results as those indicated above, it has little chance, now that it has passed its zenith and is being faced with the ever-increasing competition from other countries, to succeed in the future where it has failed in the past. To men

who are Socialists, an independent Labor Party is a logical outcome of their economic faith.

But even those trades-union leaders who are not Socialists—and there are many—are equally convinced of the necessity of the new departure. The break-up of the Liberal Party has been an important influence in leading them to this position. Free Trade, despite Mr. Chamberlain, is at present the accepted creed of both great parties. On the subject of Imperial expansion, there is little to choose between the two sides; and it is doubtful whether, even with the Liberals in office, the military and naval expenditure, which in a dozen years has gone up from £28,000,000 to £70,000,000 a year, would be materially lessened. There is no evidence whatever that either party has the remotest idea of how to grapple with the social problem and remove poverty from the land. Added to all this, there is a growing feeling that the interests of Labor cannot be adequately safeguarded or protected until there is a Labor Party charged with that particular responsibility. Therefore it is that all true trades-union leaders who are not Socialists are equally determined to wean Labor from its political dependence on some other party, and to place it in a position where it can formulate its own demands. These men see how, in twenty years, an Independent Irish Party has succeeded in convincing, not merely the Liberals, but also the Conservatives, of the justice of their claims. The Irish Land Bill now before the House of Commons, pledging the credit of the state to the extent of hundreds of millions of money to enable the Irish farmer to buy out his landlord, is a standing evidence of what can be done by an independent and resolute party, knowing its own mind and acting entirely in the interests of the classes it represents, and Labor leaders are determined to make an effort to copy this example.

To conclude, the British working-man is for the movement, thoroughly in earnest about the formation of a Labor Party, and he will not be easily turned aside from his purpose. He is realizing as he has never done before, that, with seven-tenths of the voting power in his hands, he is master of the political situation. With a party of his own, he will play an ever-increasing part in the great drama of politics, and be less easily led than heretofore by the charlatan and the office-seeker.

J. KEIR HARDIE.